

# I ACCUSE by Emile Zola

Taken from *The Trial of Emile Zola*  
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On January 10, 1898, some three years after the secret trial and conviction, by a council of war, of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, then a staff officer of the French army, of having sold French military secrets to a foreign power, in consequence of which he was stripped of his uniform in a degrading public ceremony and sent for life to Devil's Island, a French penal settlement situated off the coast of French Guiana, where he is now confined under guard, a second council of war convened in Paris for the trial of Major Marie Charles Ferdinand Walsin-Esterhazy, a French infantry officer temporarily relieved from active service on account of poor health, the charge against him — preferred by Mathieu Dreyfus, brother of Captain Alfred Dreyfus — being that he was the real author of the *bordereau*, or itemized memorandum, supposed to have been written by Captain Dreyfus, and on the strength of which the latter was convicted.

The trial was conducted publicly until the most important witness, Lieutenant-Colonel Georges Picquart, of the Fourth Algerian Sharpshooters, was reached, when the council went into secret session, remaining behind closed doors until the evening of January 11, when the doors were thrown open and General de Luxer, the president of the council, announced a unanimous vote in acquittal of the defendant.

Two days later — January 13 — “L’Aurore,” a daily paper published in Paris under the directorship of Ernest Vaughan and the editorship of Georges Clemenceau, and having as its *gérant*, or legally responsible editor, J. A. Perrenx, published the following letter from Emile Zola, man of letters, to Félix Faure, president of France:

## I ACCUSE!

Letter to M. Félix Faure, President of the Republic

*Monsieur le Président:*

Will you permit me, in my gratitude for the kindly welcome that you once extended to me, to have a care for the glory that belongs to you, and to say to you that your star, so lucky hitherto, is threatened with the most shameful, the most ineffaceable, of stains?

You have emerged from base calumnies safe and sound; you have conquered hearts. You seem radiant in the apotheosis of that patriotic *fête* which the Russian alliance

has been for France, and you are preparing to preside at the solemn triumph of our Universal Exposition, which will crown our great century of labor, truth, and liberty. But what a mud-stain on your name — I was going to say on your reign— is this abominable Dreyfus affair! A council of war has just dared to acquit an Esterhazy in obedience to orders, a final blow at all truth, at all justice. And now it is done! France has this stain upon her cheek; it will be written in history that under your presidency it was possible for this social crime to be committed.

Since they have dared, I too will dare. I will tell the truth, for I have promised to tell it, if the courts, once regularly appealed to, did not bring it out fully and entirely. It is my duty to speak; I will not be an accomplice. My nights would be haunted by the spectre of the innocent man who is atoning, in a far-away country, by the most frightful of tortures, for a crime that he did not commit.

And to you, *Monsieur le Président*, will I cry this truth, with all the force of an honest man's revolt. Because of your honor I am convinced that you are ignorant of it. And to whom then shall I denounce the malevolent gang of the really guilty, if not to you, the first magistrate of the country?

First, the truth as to the trial and conviction of Dreyfus.

A calamitous man has managed it all, has done it all — Colonel du Paty de Clam, then a simple major. He is the entire Dreyfus case; it will be fully known only when a sincere investigation shall have clearly established his acts and his responsibilities. He appears as the most heady, the most intricate, of minds, haunted with romantic intrigues, delighting in the methods of the newspaper novel, stolen papers, anonymous letters, meetings in deserted spots, mysterious women who peddle overwhelming proofs by night. It is he who conceived the idea of dictating the *bordereau* to Dreyfus; it is he who dreamed of studying it in a room completely lined with mirrors; it is he whom Major Forzinetti represents to us armed with a dark lantern, trying to gain access to the accused when asleep, in order to throw upon his face a sudden flood of light, and thus surprise a confession of his crime in the confusion of his awakening. And I have not to tell the whole; let them look, they will find. I declare simply that Major du Paty

de Clam, entrusted as a judicial officer with the duty of preparing the Dreyfus case, is, in the order of dates and responsibilities, the first person guilty of the fearful judicial error that has been committed.

The *bordereau* already had been for some time in the hands of Colonel Sandherr, director of the bureau of information, who since then has died of general paralysis. “Flights” have taken place; papers have disappeared, as they continue to disappear even today; and the authorship of the *bordereau* was an object of inquiry, when little by little an *a priori* conclusion was arrived at that the author must be a staff officer and an officer of artillery — clearly a double error, which shows how superficially this *bordereau* had been studied, for a systematic examination proves that it could have been written only by an officer of troops. So they searched their own house; they examined writings; it was a sort of family affair — a traitor to be surprised in the war offices themselves, that he might be expelled therefrom. I need not again go over a story already known in part. It is sufficient to say that Major du Paty de Clam enters upon the scene as soon as the first breath of suspicion falls upon Dreyfus. Starting from that moment, it is he who invented Dreyfus; the case becomes his case; he undertakes to confound the traitor, and induce him to make a complete confession. There is also, to be sure, the minister of war, General Mercier, whose intelligence seems rather inferior; there is also the chief of staff, General de Boisdeffre, who seems to have yielded to his clerical passion, and the sub-chief of staff, General Gonse, whose conscience has succeeded in accommodating itself to many things. But at bottom there was at first only Major du Paty de Clam, who leads them all, who hypnotizes them — for he concerns himself also with spiritualism, with occultism, holding converse with spirits. Incredible are the experiences to which he submitted the unfortunate Dreyfus, the traps into which he tried to lead him, the mad inquiries, the monstrous fancies, a complete and torturing madness.

Ah! this first affair is a nightmare to one who knows it in its real details. Major du Paty de Clam arrests Dreyfus, puts him in close confinement; he runs to Madame Dreyfus, terrorizes her, tells her that, if she speaks, her husband is lost. Meantime the unfortunate was tearing his flesh, screaming his innocence. And thus the examination went on, as in a fifteenth-century chronicle, amid mystery, with a complication of savage expedients, all based on a single

childish charge, this imbecile *bordereau*, which was not simply a vulgar treason, but also the most shameless of swindles, for the famous secrets delivered proved, almost all of them, valueless. If I insist, it is because here lies the egg from which later was to be hatched the real crime, the frightful denial of justice, of which France lies ill. I should like to show in detail how the judicial error was possible; how it was born of the machinations of Major du Paty de Clam; how General Mercier and Generals de Boisdeffre and Gonse were led into it, gradually assuming responsibility for this error, which afterward they believed it their duty to impose as sacred truth, truth beyond discussion. At the start there was, on their part, only carelessness and lack of understanding. At worst we see them yielding to the religious passions of their surroundings, and to the prejudices of the *esprit de corps*. They have suffered folly to do its work.

But here is Dreyfus before the council of war. The most absolute secrecy is demanded. Had a traitor opened the frontier to the enemy in order to lead the German emperor to Notre Dame, they would not have taken stricter measures of silence and mystery. The nation is awe-struck; there are whisperings of terrible doings, of those monstrous treasons that excite the indignation of History, and naturally the nation bows. There is no punishment severe enough; it will applaud even public degradation; it will wish the guilty man to remain upon his rock of infamy, eaten by remorse. Are they real then — these unspeakable things, these dangerous things, capable of setting Europe aflame, which they have had to bury carefully behind closed doors? No, there was nothing behind them save the romantic and mad fancies of Major du Paty de Clam. All this was done only to conceal the most ridiculous of newspaper novels. And, to assure one's self of it, one need only study attentively the indictment read before the council of war.

Ah! the emptiness of this indictment! That a man could have been condemned on this document is a prodigy of iniquity. I defy honest people to read it without feeling their hearts leap with indignation and crying out their revolt at the thought of the unlimited atonement yonder, on Devil's Island. Dreyfus knows several languages — a crime; no compromising document was found on his premises — a crime; he sometimes visits the neighborhood of his birth — a crime; he is industrious, he is desirous of knowing everything — a crime; he does not get confused — a crime; he gets

confused — a crime. And the simplicities of this document, the formal assertions in the void! We were told of fourteen counts, but we find, after all, only one — that of the *bordereau*. And even as to this we learn that the experts were not in agreement; that one of them, M. Gobert, was hustled out in military fashion, because he permitted himself to arrive at another than the desired opinion. We were told also of twenty-three officers who came to overwhelm Dreyfus with their testimony. We are still in ignorance of their examination, but it is certain that all of them did not attack him, and it is to be remarked, furthermore, that all of them belonged to the war officers. It is a family trial; there they are all at home; and it must be remembered that the staff wanted the trial, sat in judgment at it, and has just passed judgment a second time.

So there remained only the *bordereau*, concerning which the experts were not in agreement. It is said that in the council chamber the judges naturally were going to acquit. And, after that, how easy to understand the desperate obstinacy with which, in order to justify the conviction, they affirm to-day the existence of a secret overwhelming document, a document that cannot be shown, that legitimates everything, before which we must bow, an invisible and unknowable god. I deny this document; I deny it with all my might. A ridiculous document, yes, perhaps a document concerning little women, in which there is mention of a certain D--- who becomes too exacting; some husband doubtless, who thinks that they pay him too low a price for his wife. But a document of interest to the national defence the production of which would lead to a declaration of war tomorrow! No, no; it is a lie; and a lie the more odious and cynical because they lie with impunity, in such a way that no one can convict them of it. They stir up France; they hide themselves behind her legitimate emotion; they close mouths by disturbing hearts, by perverting minds. I know no greater civic crime.

These, then, *Monsieur le Président*, are the facts which explain how it was possible to commit a judicial error; and the moral proofs, the position of Dreyfus as a man of wealth, the absence of motive, this continual cry of innocence, complete the demonstration that he is a victim of the extraordinary fancies of Major du Paty de Clam, of his clerical surroundings, of that hunting down of the “dirty Jews” which disgraces our epoch.

And we come to the Esterhazy case. Three years have passed; many consciences remain profoundly disturbed, are anxiously seeking, and finally become convinced of the innocence of Dreyfus.

I shall not give the history of M. Scheurer-Kestner's doubts, which later became convictions. But, while he was investigating for himself, serious things were happening to the staff. Colonel Sandherr was dead, and Lieutenant-Colonel Picquart had succeeded him as chief of the bureau of information. And it is in this capacity that the latter, in the exercise of his functions, came one day into possession of a letter-telegram addressed to Major Esterhazy by an agent of a foreign power. His plain duty was to open an investigation. It is certain that he never acted except at the command of his superiors. So he submitted his suspicions to his hierarchical superiors, first to General Gonse, then to General de Boisdeffre, then to General Billot, who had succeeded General Mercier as minister of war. The famous Picquart documents, of which we have heard so much, were never anything but the Billot documents — I mean, the documents collected by a subordinate for his minister, the documents which must be still in existence in the war department. The inquiries lasted from May to September, 1896, and here it must be squarely affirmed that General Gonse was convinced of Esterhazy's guilt, and that General de Boisdeffre and General Billot had no doubt that the famous *bordereau* was in Esterhazy's handwriting. Lieutenant-Colonel Picquart's investigation had ended in the certain establishment of this fact. But the emotion thereat was great, for Esterhazy's conviction inevitably involved a revision of the Dreyfus trial; and this the staff was determined to avoid at any cost.

Then there must have been a psychological moment, full of anguish. Note that General Billot was in no way compromised; he came freshly to the matter; he could bring out the truth. He did not dare, in terror, undoubtedly, of public opinion, and certainly fearful also of betraying the entire staff, General de Boisdeffre, General Gonse, to say nothing of their subordinates. Then there was but a minute of struggle between his conscience and what he believed to be the military interest. When this minute had passed, it was already too late. He was involved himself; he was compromised. And since then his responsibility has only grown; he has taken upon his shoulders the crime of others, he is as guilty as the others, he is more guilty than they, for

it was in his power to do justice, and he did nothing. Understand this; for a year General Billot, Generals de Boisdeffre and Gonse have known that Dreyfus is innocent, and they have kept this dreadful thing to themselves. And these people sleep, and they have wives and children whom they love!

Colonel Picquart had done his duty as an honest man. He insisted in the presence of his superiors, in the name of justice; he even begged of them; he told them how impolitic were their delays, in view of the terrible storm which was gathering, and which would surely burst as soon as the truth should be known. Later there was the language that M. Scheurer-Kestner held likewise to General Billot, adjuring him in the name of patriotism to take the matter in hand, and not to allow it to be aggravated till it should become a public disaster. No, the crime had been committed; now the staff could not confess it. And Lieutenant-Colonel Picquart was sent on a mission; he was farther and farther removed, even to Tunis, where one day they even wanted to honor his bravery by charging him with a mission which would surely have led to his massacre in the district where the marquis de Morès met his death. He was not in disgrace; Gen. Gonse was in friendly correspondence with him; but there are secrets which it does one no good to find out.

At Paris the truth went on, irresistibly, and we know in what way the expected storm broke out. M. Mathieu Dreyfus denounced Major Esterhazy as the real author of the *bordereau*, at the moment when M. Scheurer-Kestner was about to lodge a demand for a revision of the trial with the keeper of the seals. And it is here that Major Esterhazy appears. The evidence shows that at first he was dazed, ready for suicide or flight. Then suddenly he determines to brazen it out; he astonishes Paris by the violence of his attitude. The fact was that aid had come to him; he had received an anonymous letter warning him of the intrigues of his enemies; a mysterious woman had even disturbed herself at night to hand to him a document stolen from the staff, which would save him. And I cannot help seeing here again the hand of Lieutenant-Colonel du Paty de Clam, recognizing the expedients of his fertile imagination. His work, the guilt of Dreyfus, was in danger, and he was determined to defend it. A revision of the trial — why, that meant the downfall of the newspaper novel, so extravagant, so tragic, with its abominable *dénouement* on Devil's Island. That would never do. Thenceforth there was to be a duel

between Lieutenant-Colonel Picquart and Lieutenant-Colonel du Paty de Clam, the one with face uncovered, the other masked. Presently we shall meet them both in the presence of civil justice. At bottom it is always the staff defending itself, unwilling to confess its crime, the abomination of which is growing from hour to hour.

It has been wonderingly asked who were the protectors of Major Esterhazy. First, in the shadow, Lieutenant-Colonel du Paty de Clam, who devised everything, managed everything; his hand betrays itself in the ridiculous methods. Then there is General de Boisdeffre, General Gonse, General Billot himself, who are obliged to acquit the major, since they cannot permit the innocence of Dreyfus to be recognized, for, if they should, the war offices would fall under the weight of public contempt. And the beautiful result of this prodigious situation is that the one honest man in the case, Lieutenant-Colonel Picquart, who alone has done his duty, is to be the victim, the man to be derided and punished. O justice, what frightful despair grips the heart! They go so far as to say that he is a forger; that he manufactured the telegram, to ruin Esterhazy. But, in heaven's name, why? For what purpose? Show a motive. Is he, too, paid by the Jews? The pretty part of the story is that he himself was an anti-Semite. Yes, we are witnesses of this infamous spectacle — the proclamation of the innocence of men ruined with debts and crimes, while honor itself, a man of stainless life, is stricken down. When a society reaches that point, it is beginning to rot.

There you have, then, *Monsieur le Président*, the Esterhazy case — a guilty man to be declared innocent. We can follow the beautiful business, hour by hour, for the last two months. I abridge, for this is but the *résumé* of a story whose burning pages will some day be written at length. So we have seen General de Pellieux, and then Major Ravary, carrying on a rascally investigation whence knaves come transfigured and honest people sullied. Then they convened the council of war.

How could it have been expected that a council of war would undo what a council of war had done?

I say nothing of the choice, always possible, of the judges. Is not the superior idea of discipline, which is in the very blood of these soldiers, enough to destroy their power to do justice? Who says discipline says obedience.



When the minister of war, the great chief, has publicly established, amid the applause of the nation's representatives, the absolute authority of the thing judged, do you expect a council of war to formally contradict him? Hierarchically that is impossible. General Billot conveyed a suggestion to the judges by his declaration, and they passed judgment as they must face the cannon's mouth, without reasoning. The preconceived opinion that they took with them to their bench is evidently this: "Dreyfus has been condemned for the crime of treason by a council of war; then he is guilty, and we, a council of war, cannot declare him innocent. Now, we know that to recognize Esterhazy's guilt would be to proclaim the innocence of Dreyfus." Nothing could turn them from that course of reasoning.

They have rendered an iniquitous verdict which will weigh forever upon our councils of war, which will henceforth tinge with suspicion all their decrees. The first council of war may have been lacking in comprehension; the second is necessarily criminal. Its excuse, I repeat, is that the supreme chief had spoken, declaring the thing judged unassailable, sacred and superior to men, so that inferiors could say naught to the contrary. They talk to us of the honor of the army; they want us to love it, to respect it. Ah! certainly, yes, the army which would rise at the first threat, which would defend French soil; that army is the whole people, and we have for it nothing but tenderness and respect. But it is not a question of that army, whose dignity is our special desire, in our need of justice. It is the sword that is in question; the master that they may give us tomorrow. And piously kiss the sword-hilt, the god? No!

I have proved it, moreover; the Dreyfus case was the case of the war offices, a staff-officer, accused by his staff comrades, convicted under the pressure of the chiefs of staff. Again I say, he cannot come back innocent, unless all the staff is guilty. Consequently the war offices, by all imaginable means, by press campaigns, by communications, by influences, have covered Esterhazy only to ruin Dreyfus a second time. Ah! with what a sweep the republican government should clear away this band of Jesuits, as General Billot himself calls them! Where is the truly strong and wisely patriotic minister who will dare to reshape and renew all? How many of the people I know are trembling with anguish in view of a possible war, knowing in what hands lies the national defence! And what a nest

of base intrigues, gossip, and dilapidation has this sacred asylum, entrusted with the fate of the country, become! We are frightened by the terrible light thrown upon it by the Dreyfus case, this human sacrifice of an unfortunate, of a "dirty Jew." Ah! what a mixture of madness and folly, of crazy fancies, of low police practices, of inquisitorial and tyrannical customs, the good pleasure of a few persons in gold lace, with their boots on the neck of the nation, cramming back into its throat its cry of truth and justice, under the lying and sacrilegious pretext of the *raison d'Etat!*

And another of their crimes is that they have accepted the support of the unclean press, have suffered themselves to be championed by all the knavery of Paris, so that now we witness knavery's insolent triumph in the downfall of right and of simple probity. It is a crime to have accused of troubling France those who wish to see her generous, at the head of the free and just nations, when they themselves are hatching the impudent conspiracy to impose error, in the face of the entire world. It is a crime to mislead opinion, to utilize for a task of death this opinion that they have perverted to the point of delirium. It is a crime to poison the minds of the little and the humble, to exasperate the passions of reaction and intolerance, while seeking shelter behind odious anti-Semitism, of which the great liberal France of the rights of man will die, if she is not cured. It is a crime to exploit patriotism for works of hatred, and, finally, it is a crime to make the sword the modern god, when all human science is at work on the coming temple of truth and justice.

This truth, this justice, for which we have so ardently longed — how distressing it is to see them thus buffeted, more neglected and more obscured. I have a suspicion of the fall that must have occurred in the soul of M. Scheurer-Kestner, and I really believe that he will finally feel remorse that he did not act in a revolutionary fashion, on the day of interpellation in the senate, by thoroughly ventilating the whole matter, to topple everything over. He has been the highly honest man, the man of loyal life, and he thought that the truth was sufficient unto itself, especially when it should appear as dazzling as the open day. Of what use to overturn everything, since soon the sun would shine? And it is for this confident serenity that he is now so cruelly punished. And the same is the case of Lieutenant-Colonel Picquart, who, moved by a feeling of lofty dignity, has been unwilling to publish General Gonse's letters. These

scruples honor him the more because, while he remained respectful of discipline, his superiors heaped mud upon him, working up the case against him themselves, in the most unexpected and most outrageous fashion. Here are two victims, two worthy people, two simple hearts, who have trusted God, while the devil was at work. And in the case of Lieutenant-Colonel Picquart we have seen even this ignoble thing — a French tribunal, after suffering the reporter in the case to publicly arraign a witness and accuse him of every crime, closing its doors as soon as this witness has been introduced to explain and defend himself. I say that is one crime more, and that this crime will awaken the universal conscience. Decidedly, military tribunals have a singular idea of justice.

Such, then, is the simple truth. *Monsieur le Président*, and it is frightful. It will remain a stain upon your presidency. I suspect that you are powerless in this matter — that you are the prisoner of the constitution and of your environment. You have none the less a man's duty, upon which you will reflect, and which you will fulfill. Not indeed that I despair, the least in the world, of triumph. I repeat with more vehement certainty; truth is on the march, and nothing can stop it. To-day sees the real beginning of the affair, since not until to-day have the positions been clear: on one hand, the guilty, who do not want the light; on the other, the doers of justice, who will give their lives to get it. When truth is buried in the earth, it accumulates there, and assumes so mighty an explosive power that, on the day when it bursts forth, it hurls everything into the air. We shall see if they have not just made preparations for the most resounding of disasters, yet to come.

But this letter is long, *Monsieur le Président*, and it is time to finish.

I accuse Lieutenant-Colonel du Paty de Clam of having been the diabolical workman of judicial error — unconsciously, I am willing to believe — and of having then defended his calamitous work, for three years, by the most guilty machinations.

I accuse General Mercier of having made himself an accomplice, at least through weakness of mind, in one of the greatest iniquities of the century.

I accuse General Billot of having had in his hands certain proofs of the innocence of Dreyfus, and of having stifled them; of having rendered himself guilty of this crime of *lèse-humanité* and *lèse-justice* for a political purpose, and to save the compromised staff.

I accuse General de Boisdeffre and General Gonse of having made themselves accomplices in the same crime, one undoubtedly through clerical passion, the other perhaps through that *esprit de corps* which makes of the war offices the Holy Ark, unassailable.

I accuse General de Pellieux and Major Ravary of having conducted a rascally inquiry — I mean by that a monstrously partial inquiry, of which we have, in the report of the latter, an imperishable monument of naive audacity.

I accuse the three experts in handwriting, Belhomme, Varinard, and Couard, of having made lying and fraudulent reports, unless a medical examination should declare them afflicted with diseases of the eye and of the mind.

I accuse the war offices of having carried on in the press, particularly in “L’Eclair” and in “L’Echo de Paris,” an abominable campaign, to mislead opinion and cover up their faults.

I accuse, finally, the first council of war of having violated the law by condemning an accused person on the strength of a secret document, and I accuse the second council of war of having covered this illegality, in obedience to orders, in committing in its turn the judicial crime of knowingly acquitting a guilty man.

In preferring these charges, I am not unaware that I lay myself liable under Articles 30 and 31 of the press law of July 29, 1881, which punishes defamation. And it is wilfully that I expose myself thereto.

As for the people whom I accuse, I do not know them, I have never seen them, I entertain against them no feeling of revenge or hatred. They are to me simple entities, spirits of social ill-doing. And the act that I perform here is nothing but a revolutionary measure to hasten the explosion of truth and justice.

I have but one passion, the passion for the light, in the

name of humanity which has suffered so much, and which is entitled to happiness. My fiery protest is simply the cry of my soul. Let them dare, then, to bring me into the assize court, and let the investigation take place in the open day.

I await it.

Accept, *Monsieur le Président*, the assurance of my profound respect.

Emile Zola.